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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Employee Branding in Private Universities of Bangladesh: A Qualitative Exploration of Faculty Members Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Employee Branding (EB) represents an innovative promotional strategy that leverages the active engagement of employees to enhance the branding of an organization or its products. Given the centrality of human capital in the development of the service sector, private universities can adopt EB strategies to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. This study investigates the current state of EB practices in selected private universities of Bangladesh with a specific focus on Employee Value Proposition (EVP) and marketing initiatives. The findings reveal significant gaps in EVP among the sampled universities, which undermine the effective implementation of EB. Additionally, the marketing dimension of EB is observed to be minimally integrated into existing practices. The study recommends implementing targeted EVP tools to foster greater engagement among faculty members and non-academic staff in private universities. Furthermore, it proposes specific marketing strategies to enhance the institutional brand through employee advocacy. Notably, the research suggests that developing a robust framework for branding employees themselves could be an innovative extension of EB practices. However, the generalization of EB practices within the cultural and operational context of private universities in a developing country like Bangladesh presents considerable challenges, particularly in the area of EVP. This study highlights a need for further exploration and provides actionable insights for policymakers and researchers to institutionalize EB as a strategic tool in the governance and management of private universities of Bangladesh.

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Introduction

Private universities in Bangladesh are evolving into a competitive industry, engaging in a cold war to establish a prestigious position in both national and international rankings. Consequently, many universities are adopting orthodox branding strategies to compete with one another with minimal emphasis on branding through their employees. Nevertheless, a few highly selective private universities are striving to cultivate a unique identity, yet the human element is missing. Employee branding (EB) stands as a relatively recent addition to modern marketing practices, supported by effective human resource management (HRM). In the existing literature, the Human Resource Management (HRM) perspective of EB primarily focuses on the concept of Employee Value Proposition (EVP), which engages employees in brand-building activities and corporate marketing initiatives aimed at

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positioning employees as brand ambassadors. The core objective of this approach is to help organizations achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Huda, 2019). As there is a paucity of research work on employee branding in the academia, this study seeks to explore the employee branding practices and challenges within the private universities of Bangladesh through a qualitative investigation.

Brand image of an organization stands as the most invaluable intangible asset ensuring the delivery of exceptional value to customers and contributing to enhanced financial performance for the organization, This, in turn, fosters business sustainability (Hong & Diep, 2016), and higher educational institutions are no exception to this principle. Branding a service organization poses an equally formidable challenge for an organization compared to branding a tangible product, as it requires a commitment to delivering a superior brand promise (Rai & Nayak, 2019). Hence, the significance of branding and its challenges is on the rise among scholars and managers (Dhiman & Arora, 2020). The branding of a service package, program, or enterprise hinges on the successful delivery of a superior standard consumer experience. This achievement is also facilitated by employee engagement in brand promotion, a concept referred to as employee branding (Tavassoli, 2008; Huda et al., 2020). This paper aims to explore Employee Branding (EB) practices, with particular emphasis on Employee Value Proposition (EVP) and marketing initiatives within private universities in Bangladesh, and to propose policy interventions to enhance their implementation. *

Significance of the Study

The brand's image evolves through the association of the product, employees, and customers (Punjaisri et al., 2008). Consequently, the engagement of employees and their strong connection with the brand is apparent which is achieved through effective human resource management (HRM) practices that emphasize employee development interventions, preparing employees to serve as brand promoters (Isaksson & Isaksson, 2013; Buil et al., 2016). The primary objective of Employee Branding (EB) is to inspire employees to actively promote their institution's brands through various social media channels (Cervellon & Lirio, 2016) in a structured and formalized manner (Huda, 2019). Branding an academic institution, such as a university, is a crucial endeavor achieved through the internal branding process (Chapleo, 2015).

The private university sector is a rapidly growing service industry in Bangladesh, making substantial contributions to human resource development and socio-economic progress. Despite numerous controversies surrounding the service quality of higher education institutions in Bangladesh, the enrollment of students in private universities exhibited a significant surge from 120,276 in 2019 to a remarkable 328,689 in 2021 (Bangladesh Education Statistics, 2021). Over the past decade, there has been a noticeable transformation in this educational service industry, particularly in delivering outstanding and contemporary educational services to students. Consequently, superior employee engagement is imperative for ensuring exceptional service quality and upholding the brand reputation of Private Universities in Bangladesh.

Limited research has been conducted on Employee Branding (EB), resulting in a significant gap in the existing body of knowledge with a scarcity of unique ideas and practical initiatives. Particularly, there is a notable lack of studies on EB within the context of Bangladesh, forming the research gap addressed by this study. To bridge this gap, the current research takes an explorative approach to understand EB practices, contributing to the existing body of knowledge. Additionally, the study integrates insights from senior university professors to compile a set of EB initiatives implemented by Private Universities in Bangladesh. Ultimately, the study aims to propose a comprehensive model for an Employee Branding System in the universities of Bangladesh.

Literature Review

The process of building an organization brand is complicated, and organizations need to build supportive societies by means of effective branding initiatives (Matanda & Ndubisi, 2013). Staff branding (EB) has recently become a recent business trend that emphasizes the creation of product and corporate brands through an innovative business measure (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). It allows companies to have strategic competitive advantage through involving their people (Miles & Mangold, 2005) sometimes termed as internal branding which is a fundamental role of Human Resource Management (Tavassoli, 2008; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003). Internal branding is one of the main components of effective HR practices and employees are learnt about the brand, their awareness is raised, and they are shown as part of the organizational culture (Aurand et al., 2005; Boyd and Sutherland, 2006). In the process, the employees

become ambassadors and create a good employer image in the labour market, ease acquisition and retention of talents (Gephardt et al., 2006).

The employee branding activities do not only encourage the staff to improve the relationship with the client but also the brand performance, efficiency, and equity (Punjaisri et al., 2008; King & Grace, 2009). EB encourages customer retention, company development, and global market penetration (Ames, 2017). These initiatives instruct the employees in the manner in which they will present their company, as well as motivate them emotionally to become passionate brand ambassadors (Cervellon & Lirio, 2016). They also bring the organizational behavior and identity closer to one another and form a psychological connection between employees and the corporation that contributes to building of the brand (Harquail, 2007).

In the context of HRM, EB is exemplified by hiring talented people (Cascio, 2014), making them become brand supporters, and committing them with the help of the Employee Value Proposition (EVP) (Synergy, 2015). Being a fairly recent HR initiative (Ames, 2017), it motivates employees to proactively market the organization and its brands to different stakeholders (Bauer, 2017). Further, EB enhances marketing relationships by making the brand competitive in the market (Sochart, 2009) and connecting employees with clients to aid strategic brand management (Scheys & Baert, 2008). Combining EB and performance measures also improves the quality of the service (Matanda & Ndubisi, 2013).

The EB program should start with the acquisition of talents, and the focus should be on candidates who demonstrate interest in brand promotion (Tavassoli, 2008; Huda, 2019). New hires should be exposed to brand values and identity during the orientation programs (Huda et al., 2020; Ind, 2007; Casteel, 2006). This process can be improved by service organizations with the help of specialized brand training which develops presentation and communication skills of employees (Gephardt et al., 2006; Memon & Kolachi, 2012). It could be training materials that contain brand preparation and delivery modules to make employees qualified organizational promoters (Edwards, 2005). Further studies in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) also promote the idea of employee engagement in branding via social media and voluntary brand ambassadorship by encouraging organizations to sharpen the digital communication of the staff to facilitate such functions (Cervellon & Lirio, 2016).

According to scholars like Punjaisri et al. (2008); Memon and Kolachi (2012) introduction of EB in the organizational strategy increases employee loyalty, profitability and creates customer satisfaction. Such programs generate good management-employee relationships which eventually lead to improved brand reputation (Miles & Mangold, 2004). The market performance and building brand credibility in both online and real-life networks are also stimulated by positive experiences and reviews of employees (Ames, 2017).

Employee branding is founded on either formal or informal psychological contract built out of motivation and good employee relationships (Rousseau, 1995). This understanding makes the employees to only think about the interests of the organization which could be described as brand-citizenship behavior (Mitchell, 2002; King & Grace, 2009) and is likely to reflect on their performance appraisal (Edwards, 2005). The empirical research conducted by Semnani and Fard (2014) also indicates that the effectiveness of EB is conditioned by individual and organizational beliefs, which implies that those companies which manage to foster the culture of engagement, social awareness and corporate social responsibility do so with the help of proper internal communication practices. Itam and Swetha (2022) consider that employee branding (EB) has a strong and positive association with total quality human resource management (TQHRM) in an organization. Such a relationship does not only make employees perform better, but also provides greater levels of job satisfaction, commitment, and loyalty towards the organization. With proper streamlining of branding and HRM practices, organizations can achieve a unified working environment that will encourage employees to become brand ambassadors to contribute more to the success of the organization.

A study on Thai universities highlighted that internal branding, a key component of employee branding (EB), is recognized as an essential function in which employees play a central role in the brand-building process (Kaewsurin, 2012). This is particularly a strategic necessity in service-oriented organizations like universities in Ethiopia, where employees' engagement in promoting the institution's brand and their commitment can be strengthened through brand-focused leadership and targeted training programs (Tibebe et al., 2018). In contrast, a qualitative study on private universities in Afghanistan found that factors such as job security and

workplace autonomy significantly contribute to making a university an attractive employer, serving as important indicators of the employee value proposition (EVP) (Momand et al., 2022). Similarly, the brand image of Iranian universities relies heavily on effective talent acquisition and the organization's commitment to retaining reputable faculty members (Hamidizadeh et al., 2019). Research on South African higher education institutions also emphasize the critical role of academic staff in shaping the university's brand and underscores the importance of cultivating an employee branding culture. This can be achieved through effective compensation and benefits management, organizational support for professional development, and other key dimensions of EVP (Saurombe, 2025).

The literature review indicates that Employee Branding (EB) is essentially a blend of Human Resource Management (HRM) and several marketing tools. It originates from higher HRM functions synthesized to achieve EB objectives, particularly focusing on branding a company through content and committed staff. EB's core ideas revolve around strategic messaging to optimize the brand power of an entity, specifically by leveraging employees as brand promoters. Current research emphasizes the HRM aspect of EB but lacks a specific messaging method. While many authors provide theoretical descriptions of EB, there is a dearth of application-oriented ideas and approaches. Most studies rely on qualitative analysis based on secondary knowledge, with limited primary research evidence. Several authors have investigated Employee Branding (EB) practices in diverse industries, including banking, healthcare, insurance, hospitality, retail, and airlines. However, only a limited number of authors, such as Mohamad et al. (2017) in Malaysia and Sujchaphong et al. (2017) in the United Kingdom, have conducted research on this topic. Notably, no papers were found specifically addressing EB practices in private universities in Bangladesh. This study aims to address the research gap by proposing a practical EB model tailored for private universities in Bangladesh, offering a methodological framework for comprehensive employee branding implementation in academic institutions.

Objective of the Study

The main goal of this research is to investigate employee branding practices and evaluate the implementation of these practices in private universities of Bangladesh. However, this study aims to achieve two specific research objectives. Firstly, it will seek to identify the current practices of Employee Branding (EB) in private universities of Bangladesh regarding EVP. Secondly, to explore the current state of EB Practices in Private Universities with regard to Marketing initiatives and thirdly to provide policy recommendations to address and overcome future challenges in the field of EB. *

Materials and Methods

The research methodology for this study was determined by the study's objectives, and a qualitative research approach was employed. To establish a robust theoretical foundation, extensive knowledge from previously published academic papers and reference books was systematically gathered. The initial step involved reviewing literature on Employee Branding (EB) across various countries and sectors, encompassing materials published from 1991 to 2021 to compile essential variables related to EB. For primary data collection, a semi-structured questionnaire survey was conducted through face-to-face and online interviews with twenty-eight (28) faculty members in marketing and human resource management from the 14 private universities in Bangladesh. The questionnaire in this research was self-administered and it was created by the author based on a wide range of literature reviews and expert opinion. It was formulated to achieve an overall picture of the practice of Employee Branding (EB) in the context of the private universities. The instrument had a sequence of open-ended questions that prompted respondent to discuss the experiences and vision they had on EB practices that are available, the difficulties they experience implementing the practices, and the underlying institutional forces that shape the practices. This methodology would allow gathering qualitative information of high quality that would capture the reality of EB in the context of higher education. The primary data analysis involved a cyclical process of simultaneous data collection and analysis. Repeated responses from informants were documented to identify common themes, and the widely used "thematic content analysis" method for qualitative data analysis was applied to unveil shared responses. The findings and discussion section of the paper presents a summary of the opinions gathered through this process.

Since the literature review identified two primary determinants of Employee Branding (EB), namely Employee Value Proposition (EVP) and marketing, the following questions were posed to the respondents during the interviews.

1. What is the state of Employee Branding (EB) practices related to Employee Value Proposition (EVP)?

2. What is the state of Employee Branding (EB) practices related to marketing?

Findings and Discussion

Private universities serve as high-degree Consumer Contact Service Organizations, maintaining regular and prolonged interactions with their customers (students). The brand identity of a university holds significant sensitivity for a student's career.

State of EB Practices in Private Universities regarding EVP

This study reveals that the implementation of Employee Value Proposition (EVP) practices is highly limited in the sampled private universities. A pronounced disparity between public and private universities in terms of financial and non-financial rewards is evident. Private university (PU) teachers and employees lack a standardized salary structure, and neither the Government nor the University Grants Commission (UGC) has taken substantial initiatives to address this issue. Job security within private universities is precarious, as evidenced by the significant number of faculty members who lost their positions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many faculty members who retained their jobs faced salary reductions during this critical period. Momand et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study on employer branding in private universities in Afghanistan, revealing similar findings: job security and job autonomy are critical indicators that make an organization desirable to potential faculty members, potentially leading to more effective talent acquisition.

Teacher training initiatives are conducted on a limited scale within the sampled institutions, with no specific training programs dedicated to employee branding. This lack of structured professional development opportunities hinders the capacity of faculty members to effectively contribute to the institution's employee branding efforts. Moreover, the sampled private universities demonstrate limited capability in effectively articulating their EVP, particularly in communicating clear pathways for career growth. Irregular promotion practices hinder faculty's advancement to the higher ranks, further de-motivating staff.

One of the core attractions of an academic career, intellectual freedom, is severely restricted in these institutions. Faculty members often face excessive teaching loads, with no standardized teacher-student ratios or workload policies in place. Leadership positions within private universities are predominantly occupied by retired public university teachers, creating a "glass ceiling" that limits growth opportunities for younger academics. Research opportunities and support are notably deficient in private universities. The provision of research grants is minimal, and access to modern research facilities and academic journals is significantly constrained. Faculty members are often denied paid study leave, with higher education typically being self-funded. Furthermore, university-industry collaboration for research and development remains underdeveloped, limiting the scope for practical and innovative advancements.

This study underscores the urgent need for structural reforms to enhance EVP practices within private universities, ensuring equitable rewards, job security, career growth opportunities, and robust research support to attract and retain high-caliber academic talent. EVP initiative creates a financial and emotional contract among the employees and facilitates the EB in preparing the employees as brand promoters. These results address the initial research aim of the study by delving into the Employee Value Proposition (EVP) activities of the work of the individual private universities in Bangladesh. The outcomes, however, also show that the sampled universities have either weak Human Resource Management (HRM) practices that would support and maintain EVP initiatives. This shows a discrepancy between the strategic intent and its application in the institutions under study.

State of EB Practices in Private Universities regarding Marketing

The study identified the absence of a formal policy regarding the marketing aspect of employee branding in the sampled private universities (PUs). Existing practices are largely ad hoc, unstructured, and lack strategic planning. The sampled private universities predominantly highlight senior faculty members with foreign degrees as brand ambassadors in print advertisements. Additionally, local, and foreign adjunct faculty members are prominently showcased on their web portals to enhance institutional image.

Some private universities encourage faculty participation in national and international seminars, although such participation is typically self-funded. This can be interpreted as a service marketing strategy, leveraging employees to enhance the university's brand image. Notably, one of the sampled private universities provides special recognition to employees who actively

promote university activities on social media, designating them as "social media promoters."

These findings suggest that while there are attempts to integrate employee branding into marketing strategies, they remain sporadic and lack a coherent policy framework to maximize their impact. This highlights an opportunity for private universities to develop structured and strategic approaches to employee branding as part of their overall marketing and organizational objectives. These results meet the second aim of the research as they investigate marketing efforts of the private universities in Bangladesh. The analysis shows that, regardless of the different promotional activities which are being adopted, the sampled universities show the lack of effective and strategically aligned marketing practices which help in the development of a robust Employee Branding (EB). This may indicate that even though there may be some efforts towards marketing, they are usually disjointed and do not add any meaningful contribution to long term objectives of branding the employer or employee.

Policy Prescriptions and Managerial Implication

The study reveals a scarcity of Employee Branding (EB) initiatives in private universities, with limited and unclear policies in this regard. Teachers, being the cornerstone of an educational institution, significantly impact institutional performance. To enhance the brand image, private universities in Bangladesh should implement human resource development programs for faculty members and administrative staff, focusing on traits such as student-friendliness, emotional intelligence, and effective team collaboration. Faculty members, as the most talented community in Bangladesh, play a pivotal role in institutional growth and sustainability. Therefore, HR interventions related to EB should align with the Employee Value Proposition (EVP) concept, engaging teachers in brand promotional activities.

The scope of Employee Branding (EB) should be strategically extended to integrate robust marketing initiatives. Marketing interventions for EB could develop a tailored marketing mix specifically designed for faculty members and administrative staff within universities. Personal portfolios of high-profile faculty members can be highlighted as distinctive product attributes, showcasing their individual competencies as unique selling propositions (USPs). Private universities may consider creating personalized portfolios for each faculty member, which could serve as a foundation for aligning pricing strategies that reflect their expertise and contributions. Furthermore, universities can enhance their branding by enlisting notable industry experts as faculty members, granting them academic ranks based on their qualifications and extensive professional experience.

Recognizing faculty members as critical components of the university's brand, their achievements and prominence should be strategically emphasized in advertising campaigns with meticulous attention to detail. Faculty members should be encouraged to actively maintain research portfolios on reputable platforms such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, Scopus, and LinkedIn. Metrics like citation scores and research impact can serve as performance indicators for promotions and incentives. Additionally, faculty members should be supported to participate in national and international seminars to enhance their visibility and the university's reputation. Universities can further strengthen EB efforts by allowing faculty members to actively contribute to industrial development through consultancy roles, thereby fostering closer industry-academia collaboration and reinforcing their dual roles as educators and thought leaders. Given their crucial role in an academic institution, faculty members should be positioned as a distinctive brand to attract students, emphasizing their contribution to delivering quality education—the core service of an educational institution.

Private universities are multi stakeholder institutions in which the teaching and administrative staffs have significant roles in fostering the reputation of the institutions and guaranteeing the smooth functioning of academic and administrative processes. But the structural reality shows that staffs in these institutions do not enjoy autonomy as that experienced by their counterparts in the public universities. The policies, programs and rules put by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Education are a great regulation of their activities. These governing bodies must play an active role to enable the creation of the Employee Branding (EB) in private universities. The government must think of developing standard Human Resource Management (HRM) policies to the private universities like those that are used in the state institutions and make sure that they are monitored and implemented uniformly. These policies would contribute to the creation of equity, openness, and development of professional hikes, and improve the attractiveness of the institution as an employer.

In addition, the main policy-making bodies of the private universities which are the Boards of Trustees must fully endorse and invest in strategic marketing programs

that enhance EB. These initiatives should also empower and involve faculty and administrative staff in these efforts since their involvement and support is the key to building the inner culture of the university and its image to the outside world. The joint work of the policymakers, the university management, and academic staff can eventually result in a more sustainable and competitive employer brand of the sector of the private higher education in Bangladesh.

Conclusion and Potentials for Further Research

The practice of Employee Branding (EB) in private universities of Bangladesh remains in its nascent stage, primarily characterized by an amalgamation of superior Human Resource (HR) practices aimed at fulfilling marketing objectives. In Bangladesh, the potential of EB as a strategic Human Resource Management (HRM) and marketing initiative remains largely untapped, though it holds immense promise to significantly enhance organizational performance. EB initiatives can deliver a superior value proposition across all organizational functions, making it a time-sensitive and impactful strategy for private universities. The study reveals that promoting faculty members as brands is increasingly gaining traction, particularly within service-based organizations like private universities. The EVP dimension of EB emphasizes superior talent acquisition and engagement, culminating in marketing outcomes that attract and satisfy the students of private universities through enhanced value delivery.

The EVP facet of EB fosters a strong bond between the faculty members and the university, cultivating a sense of pride and advocacy for the employer's brand. Conversely, the marketing aspect positions the faculty's profiles and portfolios in the minds of students, enhancing the university's reputation. The voluntary actions of teachers and nonteaching staff in promoting their university as an employer brand reflect the EVP perspective, while their behavioral performance in satisfying students demonstrates the marketing aspect. By projecting teachers' profiles through various media channels, private universities can create distinct corporate brand value that may resonate with the potential stakeholders. Branded faculty members are invaluable assets for the universities, serving as powerful tools for talented faculty acquisition and increasing student admission. In academic institutions teaching staffs directly interact with students, and a strong EVP strategy can significantly influence the confidence of the students.

A branded faculty member symbolizes the assurance of distinctive service delivery. Achieving EB requires a range of EVP and organizational development interventions, where the focus extends beyond financial contracts to prioritize faculty' psychological contracts. Passion for the job itself, rather than just the associated benefits, should be nurtured through superior employee development initiatives and proactive promotional efforts that position employees as HR brands. EB practices may not find significant traction in private education sector Bangladesh but EB is recognized as a pivotal component of corporate reputational marketing, particularly aligning teachers with the organization's brand reputation, creating a strong psychological bond that motivates the teaching and nonteaching staffs to embody and promote the brand's image. This alignment fosters exceptional staffing processes, effective performance and reward management, and need-based learning and development programs, all of which emphasize the concept of emotional labor.

EB also represents employee socialization and development, aligning employee behavior with the organizational mission and brand philosophy. By integrating EVP and marketing functions, EB can evolve into a practice where the faculty members are not merely tools to promote brands but are themselves developed and showcased as brands. Their potential and achievements can be leveraged as the key brand attributes, creating a competitive edge in the higher education sector. The existing literature on EB is limited, with scant attention paid to projecting faculty members as brands to enhance university's image and attract potential students. This study, while limited to qualitative analysis and secondary literature review, highlights the absence and limitations of EB within the context of Bangladeshi private universities.

To advance this field, future research should focus on empirical studies to explore the contribution of EB initiatives in Bangladesh's private and public universities. Rigorous statistical analysis is recommended to correlate EVP and marketing practices within EB frameworks, examining their impact on the growth and sustainability of an organization.

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